

The Social Construction of the Arab Online Media Audience: Paradoxical Issues in the Digital Era

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ABSTRACT: The online media services are substantially changing the landscape of audience consumption. Indeed, there is a need to know why some of the Arab audience members use online media, and how they interact with it. The core of this article tackles some contradictory issues resulting from using online media among a sample of the Arab audience. Issues of fragmentation, diversity of content, the virtual public sphere, or convergence are inherent to the current study. A conceptual framework has been developed, based on the “uses and gratifications” theory, under which two major hypotheses have been put to the test: there is a causal relationship of co-dependency between the audience of online media and the mainstream media content; and there is a reciprocal relationship between the richness and quality of online media content and its primacy and relevance among the online media audience.

Keywords: social reality, pluralism, public sphere, networking

RESUMEN: Los medios en red están cambiando sustancialmente el panorama de las preferencias de las audiencias. De hecho, existe una demanda para conocer los motivos por los que algunos consumidores árabes utilizan tales medios en red y cómo interactúan con los mismos. Este artículo aborda aspectos contradictorios que emergen del uso de estos medios entre una muestra de usuarios árabes. Se utilizan los conceptos de fragmentación, diversidad de contenido, la esfera pública virtual o la convergencia, de manera inherente al análisis. La metodología de trabajo es la teoría de “usos y gratificaciones” bajo la que se han formulado dos hipótesis: existe una relación causal de codependencia entre los usuarios de medios en red y los contenidos multimedia tradicionales; existe una reciprocidad entre la riqueza y calidad de los contenidos en red y su primacía y relevancia entre los usuarios en red.

Palabras clave: realidad social, pluralismo, esfera pública, redes electrónicas

1. Introduction

Despite the fact that the audience of traditional media has decreased, many new applications of online media have attracted large numbers of audiences like web-based newspapers, digital broadcasting, podcasting, etc. Coincidentally, many issues have been brought up due to the diffusion of these new uses.

One crucial point is that online media audiences maintain freedom of choice and diversity of content. To this effect, they tailor the content according to their preferences. Indeed, there are many overlapping audiences because there are many types of meaningful digital content. Remarkably, this kind of media transformation from traditional to digital already revealed the role of the audience as participating in shaping the new media landscape. Critically, online media organizations seek for the production of content that sweeps new platforms and lures new audiences. In doing so, they aim to maintain profitability. In turn, this would raise two paradoxical issues: diversity of content vs. the existence of an ethical value system among the online media audience. The core of this article is to tackle some contradictory issues resulting from using online media among a sample of the Arab audience.

2. Theoretical Background

Communication scholars maintain that the Internet is reputed to be global. Globalism is partly manifested in different walks of life like economy, politics, culture, and communication technology. In light of this, the global society at large has been confronted with the explosion in interactive media forms. This is undoubtedly the result of the expansive use and diffusion of information and communication technology (ICT). The landscape of media studies over the last two decades witnessed an overflow of research articles focusing on the impact of global digital media effects. However, the substantial question that may arise would be concerned with the audience share of this effect as content producer in the digital era.

Young Min Baek (2007) examined the causal relationship between communication technology and society. He came up with two ideal types of empirical causality: the technological and social approaches. He conceived technological diffusion as inducing social change, while pointing out that Giddens maintained that the diffusion of innovation led to the social shaping of technology. This argument seems important because it helps in dealing with the idea of social construction which is the main topic of the study.

Baran and Davis (2006) treated the issue of media construction by tackling the roles of media in everyday life. They wanted to check if the increasing

availability of new media enabled the audience to make some changes. To this effect, they presumed that new media could bring about widespread changes in what people do with the media. In turn, these changes can have a powerful impact on the media industries.

Joshua Atkinson (2008: 230) addressed the importance of audience interactivity by presenting a multilevel analytical system to explore interactivity in alternative media production networks. He described the role of interactivity in the media production and the creation of social networks as composed of four aspects: the organizational scope of the media, the content, the audience, and the feedback. Furthermore, three types of interactivity have been outlined including the user-to-system, user-to-user, and the user-to-document. Basically, these categories and classifications seem important in studying the reality of online audiences. Clearly, the mentioned categories and classifications sketch out the major characteristics of an online audience, which may in turn allow communication scholars to study analytically the concepts of social networking, public sphere, fragmentation, pluralism and diversity.

According to Stanley Barran & Dennis Davis (2006: 249) the social construction of reality implies an active audience who process information and reshape it to serve definite cultural ends. It is then assumed that the online audience seem to be socially active to the extent of reproducing information or content in a new shape. Critically, I assume that the issue of interactivity can also be interpreted and elaborated within the paradigms of “symbolic interaction theory”. Due to the interactive relationship between the audience and the media, two systems may exist including the system of meanings and symbols, on the one hand, and the system of induced behaviour, on the other hand. Again, this kind of interpretation leads also to the idea of construction that I conceive of as affecting the medium itself irrespective of its type and the audience alike.

Mark Poster (1998) contended that the diffusion of the Internet led to the creation of the “networked society”. I think this would bring new social realities and induce new communication imperatives that shape the types of relationships among online users. This kind of judgment may be built on the tenets of the duality in both the uses and gratifications and the symbolic interaction approaches.

Sally McMillan (2002) found that interactivity is the major characteristic of social networking. The author maintained that interactivity already became a recurring concept in communication research related to the new media, leading communication scholars to introduce new approaches and paradigms to answer many of the questions revolving around the social construction of the online audience. In turn, Shah, Mcleod and Yoon (2001) found that online social networking negatively affects the matrix of social relationships among individuals due to the amount of uncertainty regarding the real identity of users.

In addition, Loges and Jung (2001) studied the power of social relationships resulting from using the Internet. To do so, they focused on examining the context, the type of online relationships, and the process of interactivity. In terms of methodology, Stempel et al. (2000) found in their study a relationship between the use of the Internet and the demographic variables.

I think that the issue of using the Internet poses two core questions. The first one is related to the development of the process of Internet use itself, and how it takes several shapes and patterns, as will be explained in the current study. Meanwhile, the second one deals with the audience's gratifications by these types of uses. Basically, the online media content is not only produced by media organizations but also by the wide scale of audience members, such as a wide amount of the content available via the You-Tube, for instance. And, Thomas McPhail (2006: 53) maintained that new media affect both the ideological and value systems, the social organization, the matrices of power and social interaction. He added that empirical precision requires an added method or technique to handle these types of effects.

Sandra Ball Rokeach (1998) maintained that the *Uses and Gratifications Theory* grew out of social psychological traditions of research on perception. The essence of this theory is that individuals' selection and perception of the media content are the outcome of their needs and interests. To this effect, a major proposition of this theory indicates that media messages are perceived differently among the individuals due to their different background and recognition. Actually, this theory would suit the purpose of this study because it shows what the online audience would do with the media, being the core issue of the current study the social construction of the online audience. To this effect, the construction of reality requires the existence of meaning which in turn depends on the audience members who use the media.

It seems also convenient to incorporate some interpretations of the "symbolic interaction theory" in the current study. Social interaction can simply be defined as a social perspective that interprets the actions of people in society based on their coinage of the meaning resulting from their interaction. That is why I presume that the construction of reality and social interaction merge to build the system of meaning.

Crowley and Mitchell (1994: 7) indicate that interactionists become always attentive to the way in which communication technologies provide opportunities for the construction of social worlds. Certain variables become determining ones in utilizing the "symbolic interaction theory" in new media studies. They include the individual user, the social context, the systems of meanings and symbols and the surrounding environment. Many communication scholars paid tribute to George H. Mead for coining this theory in the 1930s, which was later developed

in the 1970s and the 1980s to offer scholars a new spectrum in terms of analysis and interpretation regarding the relationship between people and the media.

Specifically, this theory maintains that communication as a process is a core factor in identifying peoples' perception and interpretation of the media; the use of communication generates systems of meanings, expectations, and understandings; and the interactive communication process implies various patterns of reciprocal relationships, mutual meanings and causal actions.

Van Dijck (2009) expanded the scope of the term "user-generated content" by examining the emergence of user-generated platforms and naming those people involved in the creation of online media content "*producers*". He came up with a theoretical construct called "user agency" that reflects the cultural role of the users of new media. In light of this, he called for a multidisciplinary approach to understand the socio-economic and technological transformations that affect the triangle, organization, user, content, taking You-Tube as a case study. Additionally, Milliken, Gibson and O'Donnell (2008) found that the concept of "user-generated" can provide new insightful explanations regarding the concept of online public sphere.

Postmes, Spears, and Lea (1998) evaluated a series of studies that examined computer-mediated communication's effects on social influences in groups, and concluded that it was necessary to discuss the boundaries imposed on people's social contacts and social identity models. In all, the diffusion of new media confronts media scholars with the need for more theorization regarding the possible societal effects.

3. Methodology

The current study utilizes the mass media research survey method. It was carried out on a purposive sample of online media users (n. 200) who were selected on the basis of their usage of online media such as web-based newspapers, blogs, You-Tube. In light of the *uses and gratifications theory*, three major hypotheses have been developed to be tested:

Hypothesis 1: there is a causal relationship of co-dependency between the audience of online media and the mainstream media content.

Hypothesis 2: there is a reciprocal relationship between the richness and quality of online media content and its primacy and relevance among the online media audience.

Hypothesis 3: there is a relationship between gender and the type of content exchanged via the social networking groups.

In addition to using the quantitative method, a qualitative method has been deployed due to the nature of the topic. Graham and Whalen (2008) conducted this sort of study to explore the relationships between genre theory and new media, in an ethnographic-style case study exploring the practice of a professional new-media designer. Results suggested that current genre and new-media theories underestimate the complexity of the relationships between mode, medium, genre, and rhetorical exigencies, which may point towards thoroughly considering the use of qualitative methods in studying new media.

Equally, a *socio-metric analysis* has been utilized in the current study by adopting the *socio-gram* as a research tool, so as to measure up the social choices of the audience members that lead them to set up social networks via the Internet. The socio-gram allows us to map the social relationships of the users.

Research questions

- 1- What is the Arab online profile of new media users?
- 2- What are the types of Arab social networks existing on the web?
- 3- In what way the Arab online audience members conceive of the media content?
- 4- How did the online users interact with new platforms like You-Tube?
- 5- What are the preferences of the Arab online users?
- 6- What are the major issues of social networking?

4. Findings

Table 1. (Gender)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent %	Cumulative percent
Valid				
Male	87	43.5	43.7	43.7
Female	112	56.0	56.3	100
Total	119	99.5	100	
Missing system	1	0.5		
Total	200	100		

Table 2. (Age)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent %	Cumulative percent
Valid				
<20Y	29	14.5	14.6	14.6
20Yr+	170	85	85.4	100
Total	199	99.5	100	
Missing system	1	0.5		
Total	200	100		

Table 3. (Internet density of Use)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent %	Cumulative percent
Valid				
1 Hr.	52	26	26.1	26.1
2-3Hrs.	88	44	44.2	70.4
>3Hrs.	59	29.5	29.6	100
Total	199	99.5	100	
Missing system	1	0.5		
Total	200			

Table 4. (Internet Uses)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent %	Cumulative percent
Valid				
1	38	19	19.3	19.3
2	19	9.5	9.6	28.9
3	64	32	32.5	61.4
4	55	27.5	27.9	89.3
13	6	3	3	92.4
14	8	4	4.1	96.4
24	1	0.5	0.5	97
34	6	3	3	100
Total	197	98.5	100	
Missing system	3	1.5		
Total	200	100		

1: Reading web-based newspapers and magazines, 2: Viewing online channels, 3: Logging in You-Tube, 4: Others.

Table 5. (Interactive Media are more appealing than traditional)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent %	Cumulative percent
Valid				
Yes	101	50.5	50.8	50.8
No	41	20.5	20.6	71.4
Undecided	57	28.5	28.6	100
Total	199	99.5	100	
Missing system	1	0.5		
Total	200	100		

Table 6. (Interactive media gratify your needs)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent %	Cumulative percent
Valid				
0	1	0.5	0.5	0.5
Yes	161	80.5	80.9	81.4
No	7	3.5	3.5	84.9
Undecided	30	15	15.1	100
Total	199	99.5	100	
Missing system	1	0.5		
Total	200	100		

Table 7. (Preferences of the Type of Content)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent %	Cumulative percent
Valid				
1	37	18.5	18.7	18.7
2	17	8.5	8.6	27.3
3	126	63	63.6	90.9
4	14	7	7.1	98
12	1	0.5	0.5	98.5
23	1	0.5	0.5	99
34	1	0.5	0.5	99.5
123	1	0.5	0.5	100
Total	198	99	100	
Missing system	2	1		
Total	200	100		

1: Online newspapers, 2: Blogs, 3: News (streaming videos), 4: Others.

Table 8. (You-Tube Use)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent %	Cumulative percent
Valid				
Always	60	30	30.2	30.2
Sometimes	101	50.5	50.8	80.9
Rarely	38	19	19.1	100
Total	199	99.5	100	
Missing system	1	0.5		
Total	200	100		

Table 9. (Patterns of exposure to You-Tube Content Type)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent %	Cumulative percent
Valid				
1	7	3.5	3.6	3.6
2	20	10	10.2	13.8
3	125	62.5	63.8	77.6
4	33	16.5	16.8	94.4
13	2	1	1	95.4
23	4	2	2	97.4
34	4	2	2	99.5
123	1	0.5	0.5	100
Total	196	98	100	
Missing system	4	2		
Total	200	100		

1: Music, 2: News, 3: Entertainment, 4: Other

Table 10. (Do you add to You-Tube Content?)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent %	Cumulative percent
Valid				
Yes	16	8	8	8
No	183	91.5	92	100
Total	199	99.5	100	
Missing system	1	0.5		
Total	200			

Table 11. (Internet is a free sphere for exchanging media content)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent %	Cumulative percent
Valid				
Yes	146	73	73.4	73.4
No	13	6.5	6.5	79.9
Don't know	40	20	20.1	100
Total	199	99.5	100	
Missing system	1	0.5		
Total	200	100		

Table 12. (Interactive Participation)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent %	Cumulative percent
Valid				
Yes	58	29	29.1	29.1
No	141	70.5	70.9	100
Total	199	99.5	100	
Missing system	1	0.5		
Total	200	100		

Table 13. (Online Debate at TV websites)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent %	Cumulative percent
Valid				
Yes	45	22.5	22.7	22.7
No	153	76.5	77.3	100
Total	198	99	100	
Missing system	2	1		
Total	200	100		

Table 14. (Social Networking Membership)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent %	Cumulative percent
Valid				
Facebook	86	43	50.6	50.6
My space	14	7	8.2	58.6
Both	25	12.5	14.7	73.5
No	45	22.5	26.5	100
Total	170	85	100	
Missing system	30	15		
Total	200			

Table 15. (Patterns of Interactive Modes)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent %	Cumulative percent
Valid				
1	118	59	60.5	60.5
2	24	12	12.3	72.8
3	6	3	3.1	75.9
4	6	3	3.1	79
5	14	7	7.2	86.2
12	11	5.5	5.6	91.8
13	2	1	1	92.8
14	2	1	1	93.8
15	1	0.5	0.5	94.4
23	2	1	1	95.4
24	1	0.5	0.5	95.9
34	1	0.5	0.5	96.4
45	1	0.5	0.5	96.9
123	1	0.5	0.5	97.4
134	1	0.5	0.5	97.9
135	1	0.5	0.5	98.5
1234	3	1.5	1.5	100
Total	195	97.5	100	
Missing system	5	2.5		
Total	200	100		

1: Forums, 2: Chat Rooms, 3: Blogs, 4: News Production, 5: Others.

Table 16. (Online media content has a possible Negative Impact)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent %	Cumulative percent
Valid				
Yes	136	68	68.7	68.7
No	62	31	31.3	100
Total	198	99	100	
Missing system	2	1		
Total	200	100		

Table 17. (Code of Ethics sounds viable action)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent %	Cumulative percent
Valid				
Yes	104	52	67.5	67.5
No	15	7.5	9.7	77.3
In between	35	17.5	22.7	100
Total	154	77	100	
Missing system	46	23		
Total	200	100		

Table 18. (Online news optimum Source of Information)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent %	Cumulative percent
Valid				
Yes	92	46	46.5	46.5
No	46	23	32.2	69.7
Undecided	60	30	30.3	100
Total	198	99	100	
Missing system	2	1		
Total	200	100		

Table 19. (Content Exchange via Networking)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent %	Cumulative percent
Valid				
Yes	77	38.5	38.7	38.7
No	121	60.5	60.8	99.5
Neutral	1	0.5	0.5	100
Total	199	99.5	100	
Missing system	1	0.5		
Total	200	100		

5. Discussion

In trying to map the emerging practices in new media, many sound trends are to be considered, reflecting the common phenomenon of the convergence of the cultures of media production and consumption on the part of the audience and the content. This supports Deuze's (2007) call for studying the potential impact of the nature of the media work.

The research findings reflect the answers to many of the core issues raised in the current study. At the beginning, a questionnaire was developed and refereed. The target sample was purposively selected on the basis of using the new media platforms. The items of the questionnaire included 19 closed questions and the last one was an open-ended question.

The first part of the questionnaire focused on the demographic variables and the technical features of the online audience. The indicative result revealed that the number of female users (112) surpasses its male counterparts (87) as shown in table (1). In addition, the majority of the users are in the age category of 20 years and above.

Regarding the socio-technical features of the uses of the sample, it was evident that the audience members are exposed to many Internet media content including the social networking websites You-Tube, My Space, and Facebook. Audience members expressed their interests in the media content offered via the Internet, with 81.4% of the sample units affirming it. However, only 50.8% of the sample agreed on the likelihood of the Internet as a substitute for other traditional media. Another important result was the inclination of the sample towards viewing the online news especially those produced as "streaming

videos”. Up to 63.6% answered that they accessed the news via the Internet, following that the expansive use of new media reflects a new culture in terms of content consumption on the part of the audience. Indeed, the selection of the sample units was carried out on those users who actively participate in the daily use of new media platforms. Most of them were selected from university undergraduate students.

A complete portion of the questionnaire was spared to discuss patterns of social networking which are commonly sweeping the online audience. It was found that approximately half of the sample units (50.8%) use You-Tube mainly to get entertainment materials reaching a percent of 63.8. However, it was found that a small number of users ($n.16 = 8\%$) add media content to the You-Tube platform. Notably, 73.4% of the sample believed that the Internet represents a free sphere for them to exchange their ideas and access wide arrays of information available over the net. Even though the sample believed in Internet freedom, they abstained from the vivid and live online participation which is available on the web-based newspapers sites. In this regard, only 29.1% participate, in comparison to 70.9% who do not. Also, the sample units expressed their dissatisfaction with participating in any debates that are conducted on the sites of the satellite TV channels available on the Internet. This was represented by those who participate (22.7%) in return for those who do not (77.3%).

A complete section of variables was designed to tackle the issue of social networking. The theoretical approaches of “uses and gratifications” were applied to test users’ interests and satisfactions of such a type of networking. It was found that 50.6% use Facebook in return for 8.2% who use My Space. Meanwhile, 26.5% do not use any of them. A striking number of the sample uses predominantly the Internet to participate in online forums, reaching about 60.5%.

Regarding the perception of the online audience about the media content, 68.7% perceive media content as negatively affecting them, whereas 31.3% denied this. That is why only 52% asked for setting up an Internet code of ethics. On the contrary, 7.5% refused this and 17.5% were undecided about the formulation of this code. 23% did not answer this question.

Finally, two variables were tested to examine the relationship between the social networks of users and their sources of information and news. It was found that 46% regarded online media content as their major source of news and information. On the other hand, 23% did not regard it the prime source of information, and 30% were undecided. Furthermore, 38.5% said that they delved into social networking to get and exchange news and information in return for 60.8% who did not.

5.1. Testing the Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: there is a causal relationship of co-dependency between the audience of online media and the mainstream media content. The calculation of Chi Square revealed that it is 15.45, where the P Value is less than (0.01). This means that hypothesis 1 is highly significant. It also means that it was proved.

Hypothesis 2: there is a reciprocal relationship between the richness and quality of online media content and its primacy and relevance among the online media audience. The calculation of Chi Square revealed that it is 9.48, where the P Value is less than (0.01). This means that hypothesis 2 is highly significant. It also means that it was proved.

Hypothesis 3: there is a relationship between gender and the type of content exchanged via the social networking groups. The calculation of Chi Square revealed that it is 4.75, where the P Value is more than (0.05). This means that hypothesis 3 is not significant. It was not proved.

The Qualitative answers revealed two sets of contradictory views regarding the use by online audiences of the new online platforms. Respondents agreed on the fact that online networking enables a wide range of users to access news sources that offer a plethora of information. In addition, the new platforms of online networking like You-Tube, for instance, and the web-based newspapers introduced the audience to new patterns of news production like the use of “streaming videos”. The new modalities of the media content led to the selectivity of content on the part of the audience, which matches with the underpinnings of the “uses and gratifications theory”.

The socio-gram of the on-line group shows a reflecting picture, with a division into two groups. The first one is composed of 27 individuals who were classified according to their collective answers into three subdivisions (A, B, C). The second group was composed of 42 persons who believed that the social construction of online media intermingles with a “pros and cons” paradigm, as will be shown.

*Patterns of users' conception of the social construction
of online media (Group I)*

Subdivison (A)	Subdivision (B)	Subdivision (C)
Socially Networking	Gaining Information	Could be Ethically coded
Informative	Diversity of Content	Credibility-Driven
Diverse Content	Pluralistic	Regulatory
Entertaining	Diffusion of Ideas	Feeding Data
Productive Content	Productive Content	
Free Sphere	Intrusion of Privacy	
Accessing Information	Informative	
Subject to Regulation		

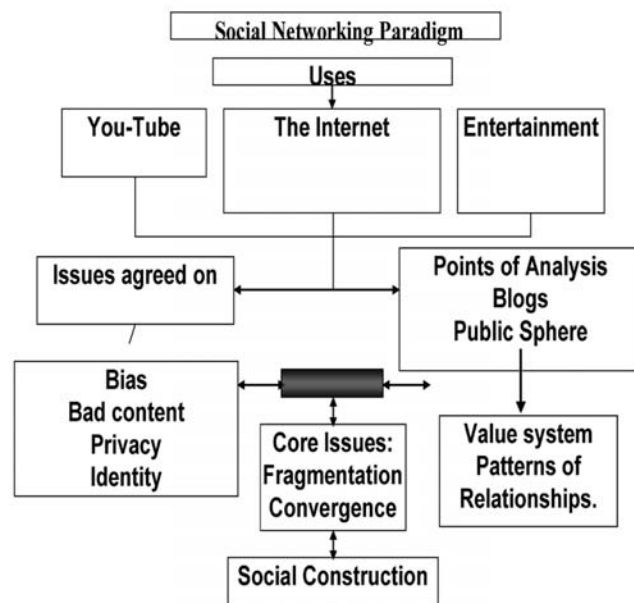
Bermejo (2009) believes that there is a need for studying the manufacture and analysis of the online audience in response to the evolution of the audience. To this effect, MacGregor (2007) found in his study that communication scholars need to get data about users of the online media to determine the types of values of their media content. Furthermore, he found that the social and the organizational contexts, rather than the technological ones, shape the way online professionals react to their new tool. Hence, it appears substantial to thoroughly consider the social aspects of the use of new online media platforms like YouTube. Chung and Yoo (2006) identified three different forms of interactivity: information seeking, socialization, and entertainment, sustained also with what the researcher found in the current study.

Cheshire and Antin (2008) maintained that social psychological effects play a major role in studying online media field experiments. The outcome seems pivotal and worthy of consideration in conducting qualitative methods in new media studies. The socio-gram analysis that the researcher used in the current study revealed the importance of examining the systems of values, relationships, and conducts of the online users.

Bañuelos (2008) contended that the practices of new media users can be conceived of two systems of cultural consumption and social interaction. In light of this, he developed a semiotic study of the textual construction and the reception categories resulting from the social interaction processes.

Sundar (2004) argued that there is a need for developing theories tackling the effects of interactivity. Based on this, he categorized three classes of interactivity: behavioral, attitudinal, and cognitive. The importance of these three items reveals the power of interactivity and social interaction in initiating actions, changing the attitudes and altering the consumption of media content and information processing.

Thus, the previous qualitative discussion is aimed at giving a critical idea about the construction of the online audience. The researcher came up with the following model that may explain what the current study arrived at. The items included in this model are cited and based on the qualitative findings.



The Qualitative Model of Social Networking

In terms of the research implications, Fuery (2009) maintained that the culture of new media revolves around four key conceptual moments:

1. How we locate the endless attributes of the new media.
2. What is the impact of new media on the formation of identity?
3. How can new media be conceived of in terms of relations?

The previous questions pave the way for communication scholars to explore new horizons in the genre of new media. To this effect, Lievrouw and Livingstone (2006: 27) stress that the nature of the relationship is more central to the analysis of new media and their social consequences. Hollingshead and Contractor (2006: 123) believed that technology could be thought of as a set of social practices that emerge and evolve over time. Finally, Slack and Wise (2006: 141) advanced the need for a cultural approach to study the current effects of new media, based on the radical contextuality of the phenomena under study.

6. Conclusion

It was found in the current study that new media platforms are substantially changing the landscape of audience consumption. There was a need for knowing why some of the Arab audience members use online media, and how they interact with it. The article tackled some contradictory issues resulting from using online media among a sample of the Arab audience. Issues of selectivity, diversity of content, the virtual public sphere, social networking were explored in this study. A conceptual framework has been developed based on the “uses and gratifications” theory. Two important hypotheses have been examined and proved, whereas a third hypothesis was tested but not proved. It was found that there is a causal relationship of co-dependency between the audience of online media and the mainstream media content. In addition, there is a reciprocal relationship between the richness and quality of online media content and its primacy and relevance among the online media audience. The issues of social networking and social construction need some more future studies to assess the extent to which the audience is socially constructed.

In terms of theoretical impact, it can be said that the researcher found a dire need for coining new theories and approaches to study the new media genre. This coincided with what Rohle (2005) asked for: a model that provides an effective tool to map the intricate relations of power and knowledge around the internet, as well as the possibility to analyze how processes of subjectification are fostered or circumscribed in specific settings.

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